

Gender and Madness in Selected Novels of Margaret Atwood

By Sandi Guthrie 0105681/N

Abstract:

Margaret Atwood, in *The Handmaid's Tale* and *Alias Grace*, explores representations of gender and madness through her male as well as her female characters. Through the use of a psychological and postcolonial framework – specifically based on the works of Melanie Klein, Stephen Slemon and Helen Tiffin – Atwood's representations come to signify the relationship between self and society in such a way as to show the connection between identity, power, powerless and the definition of madness in society. While many critics have explored Atwood's representation of identity in relation to gender, an exploration of representations of gender in relation to madness has been mostly overlooked. Atwood explicitly links the concept of 'powerlessness' to madness; madness can be seen (by Foucault and other members of the antipsychiatric tradition) as being essentially constructed and controlled by the intellectual and cultural forces that operate within society, connecting one who is 'powerless' to one who is 'mad'. As well as this relationship, the connection between postcolonial theory and psychology that suggests that Western psychology, specifically psychoanalysis, in its denial of the political influence on the psyche, denies the postcolonial subject the space in which to identify with his or her community. While Atwood's novels show an interest in human curiosity, they also represent notions of control and power in a way that makes the reader appreciate the relationship between self and society and how this relationship is related to identity formation.